STILL BREATHING

SPAHA

poems by
Christopher Hewitt

351 Turk St.
San Francisco, CA 94102

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE TRAVELER

Song of the Man with the brittle bones 7
Evesham Station 9/9/74 **9**
Metamorphosis: Fish **11**
The Mad Man of Öland **12**
On Listening to Josquin Des Prez **13**
At the Beach, Venice, California **14**
Veterans **15**
In the Summerhouse **16**
At Carnegie Hall **17**
To a Friend Who Has Not Written **18**
The Bicyclist **19**
Vermont Farmhouse: 3 A.M. **20**
Sanctuary **21**
Aunt Tina Looks Up **22**
For "Whitey" **23**
Young Men Scattering Crows **24**
A Calm Space **25**
A Day in Carmarthen, 1919 **26**
For Winter **27**
On Raggedstone Hill **28**
In Stratford Church **29**
Sunday Evening in the Hills **30**
The Granary Wall **33**
Teaching in a City Far From You **34**
I'm Leaving **35**
The Traveler **36**

(adjust numbers up one from here to end)

MUSEUM PIECES

Ten Poems written after seeing the paintings of T'AO-CHI 38
On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl' **38**
On Listening to a Recording by Paderewski **39**
The Blacksmiths **40**
Museum Pieces **41**
Autumn **44**
Triptych: A Japanese Screen **45**
All I need to Know **46**
Peonia **47**
Valentine's Day **48**
Privilege of Dreams **49**

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES

To a Child Afraid of the Dark **51**
Spaha **52**
Gentleness **53**
This Spring **54**
The Mushroom Grower **55**
Lines Written After Giving a Talk to Senior Citizens **56**
The Empty House **57**
The Bad Children **58**

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES (Continued)

Newly Blind **59**
Elegy **60**
The Enticing Lane **61**
The Sunday Carilloneur **62**
Fable **63**
When I Am Old **64**
Nostalgia **65**
The Favorite Place **66**
To Sylvia Plath **67**
Hypochondria **68**
The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman **69**
Night-Gardening **70**
August **71**
The Mysterious Barricades **72**
Ophelia **73**
The Lake **74**
Recovery **75**
Mourning **76**
Death of a Nun **77**
~~The Fold of Sky **78**~~ Tranquility 78

AT THE FRINGE (Translations)

Translations of George Trakl (with L.D. Davidson)

A Winter Evening **80**
Dirge **81**
At the Fringe **82**
Decline **83**
Sleep **84**
Grodek **85**

Translations of Thomas Berhard (with L.D. Davidson)

This Year is Like the Year a Thousand Years Ago **86**
To Say A Word **87**

Translations of Nina Cassian

The Widow **88**
Ghost **89**
The Couple **90**
Farce **91**
That Animal **92**
The Young Bat **93**

~~**THE HERMITS**~~ HOME

Elegy for Dylan Thomas **95**
The Perfect Day **96**
Homeless **97**

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026 with funding from
CLIR DHC Grant 2026-2028

https://archive.org/details/GLC67-0041

HOME

~~THE HERMITS~~ (Continued)

These Nightingales, These Swans **98**
~~Five Poems Written After Seeing The Paintings of T'ao-Chi **99**~~ HOME 99
Midnight Serenade **100**
The Hermits **101**

STILL BREATHING
~~Notes **102**~~ ~~STILL BREATHING 102~~
CHICKEN SOUP 103 ~~THE~~ SPARROW 102
~~Biographical Notes **103**~~ RAIN 104
~~TIMING~~ 105
MIDNIGHT SERENADE
TIMING 106
STILL BREATHING 109 → CAVAFY IN THE CASTRO 107
→ THE 108

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

American Poetry. Review: 'The Couple' by Nina Cassian (translation)
Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition Anthology 1980: "In Stratford Church"
Blue Buildings; "A Day in Carmarthen, 1919,'" "Lines Written After Giving a Talk to Senior Citizens"
California Quarterly: "Evesham Station 9/9/74," "On Listening to Josquin Des Prez"
Challenge: "To a Child Afraid of the Dark"
Cimarron Review: "For Winter," "The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman," "Newly Blind"
Cumberland Poetry Review: "On Listening to a Recording by Paderewski," "The Mad Man of Oland," "The Bicyclist"
En Passant/Poetry: "The Blacksmiths'"
James White Review: "The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman," "August," "The Granary Wall," "On Raggedstone Hill,'" "Recovery"
Kaleidoscope: "At the Beach, Venice, California" "Autumn," "I'm Leaving," "Veterans," "In the Summerhouse," "Museum Pieces," "On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl'" "When I Am Old," "The Empty House"
The Laurel Review: "Valentine's Day" and "Privilege of Dreams"
Loon: "Young Men Scattering Crows"
The Observer International Poetry Competition Anthology 1985: "August"
Out/Look: "The Enticing Lane"
The New Yorker: "The Widow," "Ghost," "The Young Bat," "Farce," "That Animal," "The Rabbit" (translations of poems by Nina Cassian)
Passages North: "At the Fringe" by George Trakl (translation with L.D. Davidson)
Pavement: "All I Need to Know"
Pivot: "To a Friend Who Has Not Written," "The Bad Children"
Salmagundi: "This Year is Like the Year a Thousand Years Ago" by Thomas Bernhard (translation with L.D. Davidson), "A Calm Space"
Tampa Review: "Spaha"

"At the Beach, Venice, California" has also appeared in The Des Moines Tribune and The Iowa City Press-Citizen, "The Blacksmiths'" in The Berkeley Poetry Review and Vision On (England), "The Bicyclist," "In Stratford Church" in Kaleidoscope: and "The Enticing Lane" in .Poets for Life (ed. Klein, Crown, 1989). "On Raggedstone Hill" forms part of the libretto for Cantata V: Raggedstone Hill, music by Dennis Riley, which received its world premiere at Merkin Concert Hall, New York, City, June 13, 1989. "Metamorphosis: Fish," "Ophelia," "This Spring," "The Lake," and "When I Am Old" have been set to music by composer Benton Hess. This song cycle, entitled Metamorphosis was first performed at Oberlin College in 1991 by Carol Webber (soprano) with the composer at the piano, and again by soprano Patricia Parker at Trinity Church, New York City, in 1996.

Some of these poems have appeared in a hand-made, limited edition chapbook, The Infinite Et Cetera, published by Green River Press, Iowa, 1981.

Special thanks to Cummington Community of the Arts, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Yaddo, and to Dick Wooten for providing peaceful environments where a number of these poems were written, and to Kaleidoscope magazine for their continuing support.

Chris Hewitt

To: Joseph at Desktop

Under "Acknowledgments" insert between poems published in the Laurel Review and the Observer Int'l Poetry Competition Anthology "New York Native": "Chicken Soup," "Gentleness," "Home," "Midnight Serenade," "Rain," "The Sparrow." Also, insert poems published in the New Yorker after poems published in the New York Native followed by poem published in Observer Anthology and add "Hypochondria" Two poems published in Salmagundi.

Add "Timing" to poems in James White Review

664-1580 x 2095

A4

SAFE AS HOUSES

~~SPAHA~~

by

CHRISTOPHER HEWITT

51 West 86th St. #404
New York, NY 10024
(212) 724-7258

For Richard Kanuck

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

American Poetry Review: "The Couple" by Nina Cassian (translation)
Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition Anthology 1980: "In Stratford Church"
Blue Buildings: "A Day in Carmarthen, 1919," "Lines Written After Giving a Talk to Senior Citizens"
California Quarterly: "Evesham Station 9/9/74," "On Listening to Josquin Des Prez"
Challenge: "To a Child Afraid of the Dark"
Cimarron Review: "For Winter," "The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman," "Newly Blind"
Cumberland Poetry Review: "On Listening to a Recording by Paderewski," "The Mad Man of Öland," "The Bicyclist"
En Passant/Poetry: "The Blacksmiths"
James White Review: "The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman," "August," "The Granary Wall," "On Raggedstone Hill," "Recovery"
Kaleidoscope: "At the Beach, Venice, California" "Autumn," "I'm Leaving," "Veterans," "In the Summerhouse," "Museum Pieces," "On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl'" "When I Am Old," "The Empty House"
The Laurel Review: "Valentine's Day" and "Privilige of Dreams"
Loon: "Young Men Scattering Crows"
The Observer International Poetry Competition Anthology 1985: "August"
Out/Look: "The Enticing Lane"
The New Yorker: "The Widow," "Ghost," "The Young Bat," "Farce," "That Animal," "The Rabbit" (translations of poems by Nina Cassian)
Passages North: "At the Fringe" by George Trakl (translation with L. D. Davidson)
Pavement: "All I Need to Know"
Pivot: "To a Friend Who Has Not Written," "The Bad Children"
Salmagundi: "This Year is Like the Year a Thousand Years Ago" by Thomas Bernhard (translation with L. D. Davidson), "A Calm Space"

"At the Beach, Venice, California" has also appeared in The Des Moines Tribune and The Iowa City Press-Citizen, "The Blacksmiths" in The Berkeley Poetry Review and Vision On (England), "The Bicyclist," "In Stratford Church" in Kaleidoscope, and "The Enticing Lane" in Poets for Life (ed. Klein, Crown, 1989). "On Raggedstone Hill" forms part of the libretto for Cantata V: Raggedstone Hill, music by Dennis Riley, which received its world premiere at Merkin Concert Hall, New York, City, June 13, 1989. "Metamorphosis: Fish," "Ophelia," "This Spring," "The Lake," and "When I Am Old" have been set to music by composer Benton Hess. This song cycle, entitled Metamorphosis was first performed at Oberlin College in 1991 by Carol Webber (soprano) with the composer at the piano.

Some of these poems have appeared in a hand-made, limited edition chapbook, The Infinite Et Cetera, published by Green River Press, Iowa, 1981.

Special thanks to Cummington Community of the Arts, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Yaddo, and to Dick Wooten for providing peaceful environments where a number of these poems were written, and to Kaleidoscope magazine for their continuing support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE TRAVELER

Evesham Station 9/9/74 **9**
Metamorphosis: Fish **11**
The Mad Man of Öland **12**
On Listening to Josquin Des Prez **13**
At the Beach, Venice, California **14**
Veterans **15**
In the Summerhouse **16**
At Carnegie Hall **17**
To a Friend Who Has Not Written **18**
The Bicyclist **19**
Vermont Farmhouse, 3 A.M. **20**
Sanctuary **21**
Aunt Tina Looks Up **22**
For "Whitey" **23**
Young Men Scattering Crows **24**
A Calm Space **25**
A Day in Carmarthen, 1919 **26**
For Winter **27**
On Raggedstone Hill **28**
In Stratford Church **29**
Sunday Evening in the Hills **30**
The Granary Wall **33**
Teaching in a City Far From You **34**
I'm Leaving **35**
The Traveler **36**

MUSEUM PIECES

On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl' **38**
On Listening to a Recording by Paderewski **39**
The Blacksmiths **40**
Museum Pieces **41**
Autumn **44**
Triptych: A Japanese Screen **45**
All I Need to Know **46**
Peonia **47**
Valentine's Day **48**
Privilege of Dreams **49**

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES

To a Child Afraid of the Dark **51**
Spaha **52**
Gentleness **53**
This Spring **54**
The Mushroom Grower **55**
Lines Written After Giving a Talk to Senior Citizens **56**
The Empty House **57**
The Bad Children **58**

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES (Continued)

Newly Blind **59**
Elegy **60**
The Enticing Lane **61**
The Sunday Carilloneur **62**
Fable **63**
When I Am Old **64**
Nostalgia **65**
The Favorite Place **66**
To Sylvia Plath **67**
Hypochondria **68**
The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman **69**
Night-Gardening **70**
August **71**
The Mysterious Barricades **72**
Ophelia **73**
The Lake **74**
Recovery **75**
Mourning **76**
Death of a Nun **77**
The Fold of Sky **78**

AT THE FRINGE (Translations)

Translations of Georg Trakl (with L. D. Davidson)

A Winter Evening **80**
Dirge **81**
At the Fringe **82**
Decline **83**
Sleep **84**
Grodek **85**

Translations of Thomas Berhard (with L. D. Davidson)

This Year is Like the Year a Thousand Years Ago **86**
To Say A Word **87**

Translations of Nina Cassian

The Widow **88**
Ghost **89**
The Couple **90**
Farce **91**
That Animal **92**
The Young Bat **93**

THE HERMITS

Elegy for Dylan Thomas **95**
The Perfect Day **96**
Homeless **97**

THE HERMITS (Continued)

These Nightingales, These Swans **98**
Five Poems Written After Seeing The Paintings of T'ao-Chi **99**
Night Serenade **100**
The Hermits **101**

Notes **102**

Biographical Notes **103**

THE TRAVELER

EVESHAM STATION 9/9/74

I am standing on the platform.
I haven't travelled on a train
since I was a child.
I've forgotten what you do
with the luggage.
I am holding a brown leather brief case
with my name embossed
in gold letters on it.
My sister gave it to me this morning.
She cried when I went.
She is sixteen.

I check my watch with the station clock.
"Is it right?" I ask a man
in a brown suit
who looks used to this kind of thing.
"Of course! It has to be!" he says.

I comb my hair--
it is perfect,
it is sleek--
I am new and sleek.
"Where are you off to?" a lady asks.
"Ruislip in Surrey," I say.
"That's a long way," she says.

Five minutes.
People are all around me.
They are used to this.
I check my ticket.
It is in my top pocket--
the top pocket of my jacket
which fits me perfectly.

The train is coming.
It is loud, so loud.
I have tears in my eyes.
No one is seeing me off--
we thought it best not.

I wait for some of the others
to get in. You put the luggage
on the rack above the seat.
A paper. I ought to have bought
a paper.

I am sitting in the train.
I can see my face in the window.
I am on my way to Ruislip,
nothing can stop me now,
and I am perfect--

(continued)

EVESHAM STATION 9/9/74 (continued)

no one can fault me.
I am going down to Ruislip
and I am perfect.

METAMORPHOSIS: FISH

It requires faith:
to travel a murky world
where stop signs are sea anemones,
subway stations clams.

I risk nothing
in shedding human sound,
my past's voices;
and gradually I learn
the movements of a swimmer
who never touched the ground.

I trust the sea's intention,
and inhabit a lucid dream,
opening and shutting my gills
like angel's wings,
losing myself and finding myself
with each inhalation.

I'm heavy as a feather
of mercury:
I flash and
am gone.

THE MAD MAN OF ÖLAND

(The Mad Man on Öland is the name
of a small yellow flower found on the coast of Sweden.)

Every morning the mad old man
packs his pipe with sweet tobacco,
mutters at the gulls
    "God is good. God is good..."
and shuffles down the quay
between the piles of dead mackerel
to the darkened tooth
of the breakwater which he calls
The Gate to the Sea where he believes
the patron saints
of mad old men stand--
    "Husk and Dusk I call them.
    When the gate turns gold,
    they give the signal
    and it's time for me
    to pick the flowers.
    It won't be long now--
    hear those bells? They're playing
    a song in the shape of my flower:
    each note a petal in my head."

ON LISTENING TO JOSQUIN DES PREZ

Come, it is time to shut out
the final starlight
over the pig pens.
Whistle home the curs gaily
for you will eat them tomorrow;
beware the girl with breasts like pomegranates
for she will give you the clap;
and do not trust the priest--
he has raised an eyebrow once too often.

I am sighing all for love,
but if I had it,
it would disappoint.
So I will lie,
feet crossed upon the straw,
and watch the mice
scatter in the roof beams.

AT THE BEACH, VENICE, CALIFORNIA

for Gerard O'Neill

I'm hushed up
in my wheelchair on the boardwalk,
the purple sea inviting me
to its unfoldings;
I want to leap up--
miracles in my legs--
and skitter like a mad sandpiper
into the waves.

It's not suicide I want,
no kind of losing,
but contact
with the massive man inside me,
a woman's singing,
a unifying.

The sea says "Rise! Rise!"
I stick out my tongue.

As a child
I sat up in bed
in the middle of the night
and dangled my legs over the side.
I stared at those twigs
which didn't seem mine--
white and goose-pimpled
in the moonlight.
I willed them to be healed,
to grow long, strong
and manly. If I had
faith enough, they said,
it would happen.

The sea accuses.
It calls me Coward
and Unbeliever.
It says "Movement
of muscle, movement
of muscle."

I wheel the chair
past the palm trees
back to the squabbling town.

I rock in my machine
dreaming into a blaring bar.
I stretch myself up on my arms
tall as I can
to order a drink.

"I can't hear you," says the bartender.
"Speak up! Speak up!"

VETERANS

We forgot our dreams,
the tone of letters,
the dimension of things.

Love was the dust on laurels,
Touch, the fog of wasted winter.

Now courage seems mythical;
we spell Comfort over and over
as if it were a difficult word.

IN THE SUMMERHOUSE

Caught in the emptied cup,
the fly winds down
drowsy on pear juice,
settles at the bottom.
He begins brushing
the stained glass of his wings
with his broomed legs;
the secret of his heart
bumps against his belly's side.

It's no hypocrisy to him--
germ-spreader that he is--
that he maintains,
as death waits,
his dapper self, his panache
that bespeaks the traveler
in air.

AT CARNEGIE HALL

It was all thoroughly excellent,
they say, coming out of the concert,
though Clarke read the Post
and Anne wished she were watching
Dynasty. Two students leaving
the balcony agree the chorus was
under-prepared. To one side in the
back row (whence the management
relegates those in wheelchairs)
Ilse is dabbing her eyes
with a violet-scented handkercheif.
She is remembering Vienna '36,
how in the chorus with the Philharmonic
under Furtwängler she sang this
same Choral Fantasy--that supreme
moment (she has just heard) when
everyone peaks at the final crescendo.
She has not noticed that the auditorium
has emptied or that her nurse is late.
She has forgotten her aches and
cataracts. She is present in her past.
She is totally comforted.

TO A FRIEND WHO HAS NOT WRITTEN

It's obvious:
The mailman played a trick
And hung your letter from a tree.
I suspect you also
Of cutting your tongue
Licking the flap
Patting the mailbox
As though it were my head.

You must have some news.
I do. The asters bloomed.
There's still no rain.
Oh and I go often to
A place I found
Where leaves are letters falling
All of which I've written.

How I exhaust myself
Catching them!

THE BICYCLIST

in memory of Jackson Burgess

Moustache bristling,
tweed cap slightly askew,
bicycle-clips firmly in place,
he pedalled furiously the wrong way
down a one-way street.

Hours snarled.
A cab driver poked his head
out his window and said
'Buddy, you could lose
your life that way.'

But it wasn't how they thought.
His cycle grew wings,
and like a mechanical Pegasus
he soared above the street
to its end
which was the sky
and he went into it
muttering to himself
'This altitude is very unsettling.
I wonder if I have my notes for class.'

Suddenly the bicycle was gone
and he was naked.
'I'm white enough to be a cloud,' he said
and then it began--
first toes, then feet, then legs--
he was turning cloud.
'At last,' he said, 'I'll be
pure intellect...'
With these words his head too
turned cloud, he was complete,
and floated easily
back over the city
over the somber grey
of the English building.

Above the nearby trees and slopes
he turned to rain
and fell on the quiet grass
on the stiff and shining leaves
in gentle drops
the sound of his laughter.

VERMONT FARMHOUSE: 3 A.M.

Silence rooted to the spot
unacheived as darkness.
Ghosts forbear to whisper
fearful to expose some wound
frightful as the past
mocking our trivial tries
at starting over;
in the attic
a man's awake, gaping
at the blackness
fearing his death will be
like this: no one to comfort
in the dawn kitchen,
no dog grumbling in its dream,
no one to call for;
beyond glum clouds
the moon, a sad luminosity,
shakes its head above the seething hills
wishing it could intervene
to save us.

SANCTUARY

We went out to lead the world,
sexless, poor and automatic,
sacrificing needs for what they told us
was the common good.
It took years to undo this curse--
the shiny cars and the white houses,
the bait of longing.
We fought back with drugs and movements,
ruining ourselves in secret valleys,
homesick for the childhoods
that we never had.
We recovered slowly--
a firm rebellion--
bringing gifts to friends
in the small countries of friendship.
We live simply now in modest homes,
ride bicycles: too happy doing what we like
to wonder if we're happy,
marvelling how we came this far,
how we reached the water's edge
and found the perfect view.

AUNT TINA LOOKS UP

for 'O'

Some of my niece's friends were
here this morning and I set them right.
I told them, the Sixties were pale
by comparison with the Twenties.
I was a flapper, I should know.
I could dance The Charleston better
than anyone, better than anyone.
And drink! Why, my husband's friends
passed me out just with the fumes
from the gin they were making in the
bathtub in the cellar! They came up to
look for me and there I was--passed out
cold on the deck. Later on we had a
party and drank the whole lot...
I'm sitting on the deck of my
niece's house in Arlington, Vermont.
I'm looking out at a green field and
a white fence. One of my niece's friends
called me handsome. He said I simply
glowed with serenity. All I know is,
all our troubles come from not being able
to sit alone in a room and
be at peace... I should get back to my
book. I'm reading America by Stephen
Vincent Benét. It makes me proud.
Lights are going on in the house acrosss
the field... My niece is calling me in
to dinner. Tomorrow I go back to
Houston. "Coming, dear," I say, " as soon
as I've finished this chapter."

FOR "WHITEY"

in memoriam

A carriage horse collapses on Seventh
Avenue and as she falls, slow in slow
motion as if she will never reach
the ground, she begins to
mistake things: the lamp posts
for oak trees, in their tight buds
all the white lust she used to feel;
the cut of the shaft into her flank
for the firm tap of her first owner's hand;
the sudden dark of pain that punches her chest
for a belch of joy after a good feed
in her stall.

The police have arrived already,
the area cordoned off.
'The poor thing,' says a passer-by,
'Look at her scars.'
A cop says, 'She was born
in the wrong century,"

Slightly drunk, the driver
says he'll quit and drive a taxicab.
Without paying, the passengers
have fled to the subway.

YOUNG MEN SCATTERING CROWS

1.
In the marshland sallow with spring
crows' shadows wait
for the disturbance of young men
to scatter them like memories in air.

"Education you won't get from looking at trees,"
said our schoolmaster in the brown room.
"You young men are like a green wave
lapping at the town's shore."

2.
I arrive home,
signal the young men,
my former friends who sculpt the hedges
by the river.

In the pub they mimick me--
"In London I never drink beer"--their words
riding the night's warm breath.

3.
Under this sky that know its smallness
I close like a flower
in a garden of faces.

My mother waves.
Neighbors take cover in curtains.
Perhaps I'll find a feather
blue-black in the grass.

4.
I've forgotten the sky,
but the young men I remember--
always leafing ahead of me,
weaving through cattle,
scattering crows.

The town has a lover's reach--
its touch on the hand
I clench behind my back.

A CALM SPACE

The changes you have made
are quite remarkable. Look
how you've built a studio out of
a cellar--a calm space
out of the drunken chaos
of memory--and made
a home where people come and
go with ease; how you do
people good by the very
opening of your door
and profess to know less
as time goes on, your humility
a plain yard where others come
with seedlings and you
plant them, tend them
make them grow; and most of all
how you've brought order into
your life, and neat solutions,
and judgements sane; so that
I feel quite inadequate--
unmanageable as a used car
bought from the dump
which hurtles down the bumpy
street, complaining and complaining.

You tell me not to be foolish,
it's just that we have
different personalities for
God's sake, that I thrive
on sensation and the city's drama
whence come my poems
and the people in them.
But I've done some of my best
work in this very house, I say.
You were on vacation, you say...
But still I think I should
move north and do as you
have done, and fill my loneliness--
its clean, sad lens--
with quiet streets, gentle people,
famous skies.

(for Robin Yule)

A DAY IN CAMARTHEN, 1919

A song thrush,
silent in the early light,
unravels a worm,
like a thread of wool;
the postman cycling past,
throws his cap in the air,
remembering the Armistice.

In the shadowless reeds
mallards
clatter up from the lake,
reappearing
a black strand clearing the sky of clouds.

A long cry over the valley--
a falcon wheels and stalls and
watches for the ghosts of soldiers
rustling the oak trees,
then plunges
sharp
as a bayonet.

A swan floats on glass,
exact as the porcelain
in the hilltop house,
whose shutters blink
at the horse-drawn woods
and night
folding its arms.

FOR WINTER

I press my nails into the bark
A black leaf falls
A moment of sparse horizon

Mother folds linen
There... there...
And I am comforted

ON RAGGEDSTONE HILL

Hands clasp, lips touch,
and so we learn what passion is:
the losing in the thirst for dark;
the long, clear note
between the nightjar's calling;
the lure of oneness and the tremor
of ancient gongs, their echoes falling.

The barriers to love are falling away,
everything falls away
as in great illness or dying,
with only the memory of landscapes
in the ripening sun and grey gulls crying,
and moods induced by what we can't recall
surface in waves like the scent of sea breezes
over the old stone walls
and through white lilacs sighing.

IN STRATFORD CHURCH

Before the chancel
a gate
and a woman taking money.
Fifty pence and she
lets you through:
there it is:
a plain grey slab
with the words

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

POET

Everyone is talking noisily
and pointing: there it is.

SUNDAY EVENING IN THE HILLS

1. Over Ledbury's garden fences
by the waxy-scented honeysuckle
the wives are gossipping--
'We've never heard the like,' they say,
'and naked too and in a wood.
They ought ot be--'
'They ought to be--'
'They never should--'
They shake their heads and frown
as if they were the purest virgins
and never longed for
night to show her secrets,
never longed for the forbidden giggling
and lingering
kisses on the mouth.

SUNDAY EVENING IN THE HILLS (Continued)

2. The swifts are circling
the tower of Eastnot church.
The organ booms;
in stiff collars
strained tenors
aim at high C's,
and red-faced choirboys,
tousle-haired and giggling,
are suddenly serious
for the Amen.
The Vicar sermonizes
on the virtues of discipline
while a girl with plaits
sucks butterscotch
much too loud.
All are gone now
except the organist
who plays a voluntary,
and one small choirboy,
listening solemnly behind a pillar,
who resolves when he grows up
to be a monk.

SUNDAY EVENING IN THE HILLS (Continued)

3. In the Horse and Jockey
the townsfolk are carousing--
a chatter of percentages,
and smutty jokes.
The villagers play darts
and argue times of planting
and the football scores.

At ten all stumble onto silence:
the villagers meandering homeward,
arms entwined, singing
beneath a battered moon;
the townsfolk sliding
to the highway
in their boats of death,
rushing the stars.

THE GRANARY WALL

What shall I do by the granary wall?
I'll conjure visions:
Nicola arched eyebrows
mouth like a bruise the kind
my grandfather would have hated.
There he is his eyes turned
from grandmother to the barn
its sadness its young men.
He mutters through the years;
no seed spilled except for my father
there laughing in a bar
head back like a fresh horse.
Father who drank himself into a bottle
emptied in a ditch
who feared the completeness of grain.
My mother mourns
flutters in shadows
forever at three in the afternoon.

Grey wall and on it Philip a red smile
a broken tooth and between us
only my stories of the farm,
he outstaring me in a bare room
filled with Nicola.

A childhood friend there's a comfort
Harry who was tender with horses
and who liked to make love
on mud he said because of the sound it made.
Harry struck by lightning
rescuing a cat from a telephone pole
and I couldn't face the funeral
I went to the pictures with Philip
there's a comfort;
Philip and Nicola deserving each other...

My hands scatter the geese
the wind holds their cry;
my step halted always by the granary--

in now to mother and kitchen,
to white plates and steam.

TEACHING IN A CITY FAR FROM YOU

At the reception I ask the woman
next to me "What do you teach?"
"How to assess your valuables," she replies.
"I don't have any right now," I say and
think of the unruliness of the pillows
as you rose from them,
the quicksilver of your tongue
surprising me in new places,
your quiet nodding as I argued
in favor of Vermeer
even as the dawn light came in.

You come to the classroom as I
am taking my students around the Metropolitan.
You stare out across the scheming city
which aims always to improve itself;
you sit at a desk and write me a note
as I tell them "Vermeer was, as you see,
preoccupied with the details of domestic life.
Note the precision---
the folds of the linen cloth which appears
almost to be slipping from the table,
the patterning on the milk pitcher
so intricate; and, of course, what he is
most famous for, filtering through
the heavy leaded windows, bringing everything
alive like a character about to step into
the room: the light!"

I'M LEAVING

I've decided
there shall be a new currency
of dead leaves.

I made a purse of bark:
inside, beech leaves
quick as beaten copper,
sycamore
the wrinkled palms
of old fisherwomen.

What shall I buy with my leaves
and who will accept them?
The bookseller refers me to a therapist.
The bartender throws me out.

I will go from here:
a view longing for
white air.

I will donate my savings
to the slant of light--
each leaf a note,
a faded promise.

THE TRAVELER

They have lost me--
Almost. They're still trying
to remember: at a party
They say, 'Was he the one
With arched eyebrows, the eyes
That shone very blue...'

I moved long since to France
and Germany, past grey rivers
I went by tall grasses
Lost in clouds.

In Prague
A woman told me I was beautiful
And said she couldn't leave
Her husband's house because I
Was an idea she had when
She was very young.

I'm still here as a matter
Of fact--in Meredith, New Hampshire,
Looking out over the lake.
There's a pine tree
I visit often,
Stroke the bark.
If they must know, I still
Gulp my tea too fast and belch
After dinner and get romantic
About geraniums--the red ones
In my window-box
Above the yellow wall.

MUSEUM PIECES

ON SEEING VERMEER'S 'OFFICER AND LAUGHING GIRL'

I know that she let him in at the back door
that they don't have much time.
Perhaps her mother is out on an errand.
Perhaps he's been suddenly drafted.
I'm sure he's in the middle of a speech
which he's well-rehearsed:

> 'You're so pretty.
> So alive and spirited.
> I have a gift for you.
> It's nothing much.
> But I bought it in the Indies--
> A bracelet made by a blind girl...'

Will her mother come home and surprise them?
Is he a philanderer?
Do they marry?
Is he killed in the war?

I'm glad the officer has his back to us,
remains anonymous, and that the girl is caught
forever in the delicate flush of her delicate lust,
in love and falling
for the first time.

ON LISTENING TO A RECORDING BY PADEREWSKI

The notes fragile
like forgotten lace.
Sentimentality became the Edwardians.
It was an age of maxims:
"Put your best foot forward."
A generation of young fathers
with no idea of leaving home.

Mr. Sutcliffe saved his pennies,
took his daughter Lily
by train from Halifax
to hear Paderewski play
at the Albert Hall.

Lily, now ninety-four,
puts her head on one side
and shakes a finger for emphasis:

"The funny thing is,
I don't remember a note
of what he played.
But, oh, his hair!
He had a shock of chestnut hair!"

Lily gives me the Paderewski record:
"I won't be needing it much longer!...
You know in all my life
I don't regret a single day."
She laughs.
"Well, maybe one or two...
But not Paderewski day.
I can see him now.
All those years ago.
All those years..."

THE BLACKSMITHS

What's become of us?
Iron shoes nailed to our palates.
our fingers burned to stumps.
Numb to the veined ripple of horses' flanks.

They say that men will ride forever,
Stopping for help in our dark forges,
And we will send them out shimmering
In spring air.

But we outlive ourselves,
Sting the earth like old snakes.
We stutter the first word again:
Mother Father Horse Stable.

No one remembers us remembering
The sunlight slid into the wall.
The cockerel exhales our last rites--
A cold breath at the manger's edge.

MUSEUM PIECES

1.
The desk
has words
etched in its veneer,
tiny buff worms,
a mess of dreams.

The owner was, you guess,
a famous poet,
an inventor.

Wrong. But, better still
(according to your romantic sense)
an ambassador. The British
Envoy to the Caribbean, 1702-
1710, staunchly faithful to Queen Anne.

Ambassador Sir Roger Boult
was shot through the heart
by a mistress who cried "Traitor!"
as the gun went off.

The desk was shipped from Kingston
and sold to a dealer
in Canterbury.

But perhaps you were right
in a way. Sir Roger may have
written verse. A few words are
still decipherable
where his pen pressed hard on the paper:
Honour. Thighs.
Ebony. Darling.
(and what's that?)
In-de-fat-ig-able?

MUSEUM PIECES (continued)

2.
The periwig
had all the possibility
of topping dignitaries.
Instead, a pensioner
bought it on a senile spree.

In its short career,
it bobbed from coffeehouse
(it fell off twice)
to whorehouse
(twice it was removed)
to park bench
(left mysteriously to wither).

The younger children almost
tossed it to the ducks; but Rupert,
being twelve, snatched it up and
took it home. His father said,
"A periwig? No one wears them
much these days. Keep it, son,
as an investment."

Rupert became an under-secretary
at the Ministry of Defense.
In 1904, while turning out a drawer,
he found the wig,
and sold it for
a hundred punds to pay
a gambling debt.

MUSEUM PIECES (continued)

3.
Aurora's skirt
had five pleats--
not stitched--
it hung that way
as satin goes
instinctively.

In her best mood,
Aurora would twirl
(I'm told) like a mad thing,
would arc up the pleats
like willing branches
to summer air.
She'd laugh
(the tease)
and run behind a tree
she'd calculate
the nearness of.

The skirt had sixty years of life,
its mistress only eighteen.
I took it to the cleaner
who advertised a "special".

It disintegrated
like a bird flattened under wheels,
the five pleats
snapped in a feathered tangle.

"Sorry," said the cleaner,
"You should have taken it
to the Museum. They know
about such things."

AUTUMN

My coat no longer keeps me warm:
To spite me, it clings to the solace of its hook.

The candle's scent disappoints: It's not the heart
Of a night chrysanthemum.

I collect coins, I'm tallying the profiles--
Roman senators, worth so little.

A spider's spun her web at my window. She counts
her victims--a fly, two mosquitos, and a gnat.

After all these years I still see
Your goddam shoes kicked off in leaves.

TRIPTYCH: A JAPANESE SCREEN

for George Evans

In a maelstrom of strokes
the monk becomes
his own brush whisper,
his own ink flow,
a mumbo-jumbo of signs:
this is his dervish,
his ultimate song--
the brush falls
the dizzying
scroll cascades
to the floor...

In the morning he wakes
laughing,
tears up the scroll
and flings it from the balcony...
the pieces float uncertainly
like fledglings trying air.
like new snow.

He has given up calligraphy,
has become a swordsmith,
and late at night,
drunk,
he tells this story of himself:
'It was my finest gesture,' he sighs,
'The closest ever I came to loving.'

ALL I NEED TO KNOW

Foetus in a jar:
Love in a glass case.

I don't like the look of it;
I know I was conceived
Immaculately
Born at the age of three.

Love's a child
That can walk
And say his alphabet

(for Henk van Kerkwijk)

PEONIA

(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Everything is falling in blue
moonlight--the cellophane flowers,
the tipsy black vase,
the lipstick (uncertain little phallus),
the mirror with its lips
reflected or painted on we cannot tell;
but someone's here, right where
we're standing, who knows the answer
and she's laughing: "The joke's
on you!" she's saying, her hot breath
in the moon-blue dream-
room loneliness.

VALENTINE'S DAY

(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Oh, it's not you I love
red-shirted one with
your obvious card, your
scentless roses and besotted
stare that bores me so; nor you
who spy at me from the sill
thinking you're next in line
when redshirt gets the boot.
My mind's a sapphire eye,
my body a strange fish
only the moon sees.
I'm a tease you say but
actually I'm shy, holding in
deliciously the preciousness
of self. For men of quietness
only--stars on water--I'll unfurl
the whole day of my heart.

PRIVILIGE OF DREAMS

(after the painting by Beatrice Ost)

Under the hat your half-
hidden head that holds the dream:
long-ago-dancing with a man
you feel safe with--it is your father
and yet not for he has a red
moustache and a sailor's shirt--
and you are waltzing in a blue-lit
ballroom with green taffeta walls
to a drugged saxophone and the man is
saying "Forever, forever..."
and you are whispering "Yes, yes..."
and when you awake the sun will have
scorched your sprawled thighs
that you despise and you will have
sand in your mouth and you will
remember you are twenty and alone
with Mother watching from the balcony:
Such is the privilege of dreams.

MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES

TO A CHILD AFRAID OF THE DARK

The night bell tolls
but no one dies;
the old dogs howl and are lost
but will slouch home at dawn.

Answer the ghost's question.
He waited all his life
to visit whom he wished--
the innocent, alone,
child that needs night-fathering.

Lead your dream acquaintance
to the morning field,
the playground,
after other children go.

Your heart is an unnameable presence:
the infinite et cetera of stars.

SPAHA

they call it in Swahili:
it means the silence between
the lightning and the thunder clap
and (as I interpret it) that hiatus
so tense you can taste it--the moment
before a kiss as lips approach.
In Portugese they have fourteen words
for table; here in our poor tongue
we can only stumble in the spaha
before the unborn word, which, if we
knew it, we could cry out in a clap
of thunder so mighty and so joyous
it could cure all hesitations,
all impediments of speech.

GENTLENESS

I disliked him from the start.
He never looked you in the eye,
screamed at the dogs
and kept moving things
my friend (his roommate) had placed
around the house with care.
He drank too much, wore
sunglasses by candlelight
and sulked. When he went
off to work, the house became
a home.

But one night
when I came back with a rose--
wrapped in tissue paper--
someone had given me for
reading my poems, and I
forgot about it because I was
weary, I went to bed and found that
he had put the rose in a crystal vase
on the bedside table and added
ferns, arranged them even. And so
I felt ashamed and thought
for everyone there should be a rose,
a rose on the bedside table,
adn that small part of him
that thought to put it there was
not so small, was kindness even,
gentleness.

THIS SPRING

As usual I'm emerging
from the secret corners,
the antique doorways.
This time it's subtle--
no cure-all or wild green euphoria;
rather a careful opening--
the growing confidence of the tulip,
in stem however frail.

I don't look to fall
in love or out of it but
seek only calm changes
like geese scooping future air
and descending on the scented estuaries.

THE MUSHROOM GROWER

tends his tiny phallus-fists
ponders with flashlight the rows
of sleeping foetuses as if
he had entered a giant womb
of all the waiting babies,
the mid-wife making safe all
future life.

He grunts. He whistles
softly. 'Ah, my babes,' he thinks,
'my dangerous thrusting flesh-
pods, trust the dark. Dream on
in my heart's womb. I pray
for you in my house on the hill.
Soon enough I'll wrench you
into the cruelty of day.
You'll be betrayed by me,
sold to the mouths of day-lovers...
Some mornings I can't sleep
thinking of how I exploit the night,
that lets nature be itself
uninterrupted. Grow, my little ones,
and make me rich. Night is not
guilty: I will take the blame.'

LINES WRITTEN AFTER
GIVING A TALK TO SENIOR CITIZENS

When I said
The old have wisdom only for themselves,
I meant the self knowledge of
the fig tree, that coils for light
around the evening gable and
like a sad hotel shelters
its few loyal sparrows
and the parson's young widow who
comes each anniversary
and sits smiling in its shade.

I envy that tree
in mad moments
like when you catch yourself singing
gibberish on the sidewalk
like Dickens on a night walk
or Elgar on his hills.

Already I've outgrown the forlorn
nocturne of rivers
and the sad-eyed men
who can't sleep because of the poems
they can't write
in the unkempt gardens of their heads.
I'm not a fellow to the bell-
book-and-candled night
not in the lists with lovers.
Let them talk.

I'm burying the furniture of dreams,
my past's iconography--
the mossy ladders to the loft,
the muddied bicycles
by the lost metronomes of gates.

THE EMPTY HOUSE

'Brush the leaves off your coat,'
you say, as I wait for you to
unlock the door. 'Or they're bound
to find one. And let's make sure
the wheels on your wheelchair are
absolutely dry before you come in.
Otherwise they'll spot the tracks.'
I'm incredulous at your fear--
you've just turned forty-three.

I wheel around their living room.
Many photos on the desk--but none
of you. Your parents are landscape painters:
well manicured pen-and-inks on the walls--
signed and titled, numbered, ready to
show. The bathroom has monogrammed
sets of towels for guests, who,
you tell me later, never come.

I feel like peeing on the carpet
or setting fire to the tablecloth.
I want to leave them a note saying,
'Notice your son? He is a kind man.'

They will return in the morning from
Brazil to resume their clean lives,
surrounded by woods chaotic
from a recent storm. How, I wonder, do people
come to separate themselves like this?
After dinner we scrub, sweep and whisper
our way out of the house.

I hope I've left a track or two. Ah,
but then they'll scold you: 'How dare
you bring guests here without our permission?
And no more bicycles. We could have
lent you the car--you only had to ask.'

THE BAD CHILDREN

Mother, we won't
ever brush our teeth again,
or say those silly prayers;
we'll read naughty books
by flashlight under the covers.
Then we'll open the window,
climb down the fire escape,
and joyfully risking pneumonia,
run out naked under the moon
into the Field of Lilies,
where the Real Christ will be
waiting, arms outstretched,
ready to play.

NEWLY BLIND

I am a man of taste and have
many lovely things around
my house. My friends would say
that all my life I've cultivated
beauty far too much--handsome friends,
dashing lovers--I sometimes think
that's why I'm doomed no more to
see. Now I have to search
for beauty that's within.
Seeing with the heart is hard.
I fear I'll never learn the art,
be confined to quick encounters,
helped and helpers. I cannot tell
if they are ugly or have charming faces,
those who guide me over crosswalks,
into elevators, down into the
subway. I cannot sense if,
could I see them, they'd be
the ones I'd trust,
though some I get to talking with,
exchanging numbers. I have to go by
timbre of voice, by delicacy
of touch.

ELEGY

(for Richard Alpers)

If there were a word
that meant
gentle innocence
that meant
frail bird with eyes ever watching
that meant
child's hands reaching for red flowers
that meant
kindness in being and doing
that meant
elegance without conceit
that meant
delicate breeze in the catalpa tree
that meant
the crafted blondness of light
that meant
tremulous voices translating the stars--
if there were a word
it would be Richard:
RICHARD
the word given to us.

THE ENTICING LANE

If I should be told,
suddenly and quite unceremoniously,
that I too had The Disease,
I would think, over the years,
I had complained too much--
the phone's ringing constantly
(lucky I was to have
so many friends),
the hours of my job
(fortunate I was to have
a job I liked),
the lover leaving
(ah, but he was here,
wasn't he, and in my arms
for so long?).
I should have lived in
the moment, kept a secret
corner for myself to breathe in,
allowed my life to blossom
at last--each leaf uncurling
wet with secrecy to dry
in the spring air.
I should have taken more risks--
old stick-in-the mud that I am--
a balloon trip over the estuary;
speaking up on behalf of the
deaf-mute man at the bank who
was so rudely abused by the teller;
that antique bowl with red
peonies on it that I could
have bought in a shop in England.
But I let myself be dissuaded
by the sensible people.
I should have sought more balance--
silence/laughter,
cool shadow/hot rain,
nights drunk on someone/nights
alone with the dark's quiet watching.
I should have followed intuition
to the Nth degree and trusted it,
kept to that singular path, the enticing
lane with plush hedges, ripe fruit
and wafting scents, that is always there
in the heart's eye and I could have
walked it, always prepared,
even into Death's Unknown and
still have been content, peaceful
as a child dawndreaming by open windows
before the others are up and everyone,
even the child, is wrenched into the world's
bombardment, the malestrom of appointments
which constitutes a life.

THE SUNDAY CARILLONEUR

A light touch, and Heaven
and Hell reverberate,
I'm the earthquaker, the tornado-
maker. Trees arch, buildings sigh,
the hearts of the faithful swell
and the sleepers curse--those tone-deaf
atheists stop their ears.

After my hymns, a silence like thunder.
I hurry home on velvet feet
and raise the latch with satin hand:
Hush now, heart,
and count your blessings.

FABLE

Four young horses,
free in a field,
bruised arms of sun,
shattered backs of shadow.

Then, in deep-eyed thought,
with slow turn of neck,
each decided on a territory.
Two chose to live in shadow:
one, a limestone rock,
one, a twisted alder tree.
Two chose to live in light:
one, sun direct,
one, light reflected from the rock.

Those who chose rock-shadow and rock-light
mated,
produced quiet offspring
at the margin of demi-shadow,
content with limitation.

He who picked sun direct
grew weak and sightless,
stumbled over ragged stones,
died young.

She who chose the twisted alder tree
outlived them all,
was not content
and grew distracted,
a child of insight,
ruminating years.

WHEN I AM OLD

When I am old I will be
Very nasty.
I will lean out my attic window,
My hair all cobwebs,
And shout, "You're all crazy!"

The children I will turn to pebbles
In the stream
The young women to willow trees
Young men to apricots.

I will mutter around the house:
I am this
Chair
I am this
Flower.
I will be a long dream of childhood
Cry like rain on the sill
Shine like a migrant bird

And each day at dusk,
I will bang a yellow gong,
The Heavens will open,
I will rise and greet them all,
The past's quiet audience,
And they will scorn me
Or applaud me
As they wish.

NOSTALGIA

Down the eternal street
we totter frail and laundered
peering myopically about us
as if we were returning
for something we had lost--
in the air somewhere near here--
a particular dust mote,
a high red window in a
perhaps-dreamed-of wall.

We do not like what we are;
we do not like anything
except what is unattainable
in the heart's photography,
a faded album,
locked away.

We wander into the blue
church of cherry blossom
remarking not conversing,
pointing to the hopscotch
in the orange light.
We are still hoping for
the Royal Stranger,
purple robed and smiling,
to appear in our path
to answer our question about
the purpose of still being here
after all the important things
have been said and done.

THE FAVORITE PLACE

You look at the absence
at my side--the air
that might have been an arm,
the sleeve of emptiness
neatly pinned.
You are curious--I imagine--
as to how I lost it:
Was I born without it?
Was I right-handed?
And do men not ask me out
because of it?
Have I had children and, if so,
could I tend to them as a mother should?
My face is good you notice and I
have nice long legs. I might
have been a model but all because a
lover left me at eighteen
I tried to throw myself
under a train
and missed.
They found the arm on the platform;
at the hospital they tried to sew
it back but the flesh didn't take;
and I was cut off to high up
for prosthesis:
I learned to write left-handed,
I carried my babies
in the crook of my left arm;
I do have sex, thank you, and my
husband has no complaints.
Sometimes he kisses the space where
my arm used to be and says "This place
is my favorite: because of this I hold
you specifically mine; you are whole and
you are beautiful as if you had been
born this way.

TO SYLVIA PLATH

I hear from a friend of yours
that you were witty, laughed a lot,
adored your babies and wandered
waif-like in the Devon lanes,
culling roses from their banks--
and yet I never read of it.
Difficult, impossible perhaps,
but you stared them down
and sang of them, your accolades--
bright planets that you loved
to pose among, fending off
the witches of the high moors,
those jealous biographers
of the dark, whose wailing
finally claimed you. How you
danced upon their sullen graves--
eerie and triumphal--
before you sank
into your own.

HYPOCHONDRIA

A slight hearing loss
said the doctor; but I will not
leave it at that: I know I have
a tumor of equal size on both ears--
quaint ear muffs of deadness--
striving to connect and do me in.
Already there are spots before my eyes
pulsing like ambulance lights and a
drumroll in my brow--a funeral clanging.
I miss a word: is it doom?
A friend's child says out of the blue
'You have a new future; after death a new
future begins'--he is five and intuitive--
he knows.
Just when everything was rising to perfection--
this calamity: if only I had finished
my life's work--my life! If I had said the word
to change imaginations and help you all...
Oh, I'll come back brandishing my
ear trumpet and you will shout into it your
glib advice: Accept Adjust Reorganize

THE DEFROCKING OF PASTOR VAN DIEMAN

The deacons have left:
those inquisitive bastards
with their notarized scrolls
and their shrivelled genitals.

I've retired to my loft,
its lattice open. The autumn
night takes deep breaths for me.
God has sent the moon, full even,
as a comfort. He knew
I wasn't meant to be celibate,
how men in the fields would
keep me gazing, how village hands
would distract me in the barn.

The secret's out: now I can pursue
them openly. But I'll keep the private
names I gave them--
Hare, Eagle, Hound and Dove.
Some will stay loyal.
There's one I fancy--Eagle--may choose
to be my fellow
public reprobate.

The moon is a white lens. Through it
I see a childhood scene: I'm working
with a chisel on a wooden box-lid,
chipping out a young man
of bold proportions--
a rough angel, clouds for wings.

NIGHT-GARDENING

The garbage man snatches
at chaos, the after-business.
He tries to see a beauty in
all this, caring so much for
ugliness that he's the hider
of it. He wishes he could take
it all, once and for all and
make things orderly. Oh,
he would walk with pride then,
on his lips a righteous smile;
he'd take up night-gardening,
grow moon-white lilies,
trumpeters of cleanliness,
and ivory gardenias,
wafting their scent (his triumph)
into the silent, immaculate streets.

AUGUST

Under the Catalpa Tree, fanning itself
like a jaded peacock, you tell me
a story you have told before:
it concerns an old man of Tuscany who said
he valued love more than his riches.
He gave away his riches to his boy lover
who invested them, doubled them
and left with the money in a boat
with a yellow sail. The sail was so
yellow you say that it blazed like the sun;
like the sun, I repeat, snapping
off grass blades and arranging them
in a circle on my lap. And the old man, you say,
was left to wander distractedly and beg
in the streets. The old man's name was
Alonzo known ever after as The Great Lover
and the boy lover's name was Giorgio
known ever after as The Crafty One and
he married a mulatto dancer in Madrid
and was never heard of again
and I look up at the catalpa tree
which drops a leaf courteously in my lap
in my circle of grass baldes and I say
Come to the point: tell me
you're leaving me.

THE MYSTERIOUS BARRICADES

What is it, my love, makes us turn
from one another, despite our caring,
and lose forever what we had?
How can we pass through the mysterious barricades?

At the end of memory's path
would lie a jewelled answer;
and the heart's tip, could we sharpen it,
would cut through all the layers of longing.

Through those veils
is the lover of a lost dream;
is the piece of jade
in the mandarin's palm.

OPHELIA

Whenever, like Ophelia, I'm in jeopardy,
I dream I am she--in time's aspic
(the eternal river)--and eternal fish
locked beyond words. The moon
beams down on me, has the face
of Hamlet, his dark body invisible,
but is not he, has not even read the play,
and lifts me warm and fresh
into a second life where I dance
with him in a field of flowers
whose names
I cannot remember.

THE LAKE

If only I could change
like the lake--
dark-light-dark--
a broadening smile.
They could go crazy
on the banks;
shout; turn
cartwheels. Still I
would be placid,
for all their
coming and going.

RECOVERY
(in memory of Troy Davis)

Finally we are loved--
friends call,
bring unexpected gifts
of zinnias, figs and
photographs.
We are tactful
though we retain a
passion red and thorny
and may blossom
suddenly when challenged.
We seek clarity
as the lark blue ether
or the salmon their clear streams.
Time takes our peccadilloes
like a scoop of flour
and scatters them
into the wind.

MOURNING

Now the live one
is a memory,
I favor things inanimate:

Walls comfort
as if to say
"We will hide you here--
picked tulip in its vase
head turned
to the evening garden."

DEATH OF A NUN

The sisters hand out roses
in the dawn--petal by petal;
attrition narrows their eyes--
like nutmeg
fasting wrinkles the soul;
behind bars
the moon flashes;
water makes huge sounds
in the chipped cup;
their feet tap
extremely--
a blind's drawn down,
the safety of their whispers,
an eclipse;
beyond leaden clouds
the wind slides angels
down its glassy banisters.

THE FOLD OF SKY

Inside the fold of sky
they tell me dark birds are swirling
like lost surfers in Pacific waves;
they dive and rise, dive and rise,
their cries the cries of old pain--
widows cradling their sons
dead in a useless war,
children lost in the white plains
of sleep. The birds are hidden
from us like our own death
until its own time; their song
is distant, barely audible,
but sometimes it comes
as our name called behind us by
a passer-by, sometimes as a screech
of tires in an almost-accident.
We know the birds are there
waiting for us in the fold of sky
until we enter it. Some say
they will attack us,
ripping the flesh from our bones,
plucking our eyes from their sockets.
Some say they will not be birds
as we had thought but angels
circling us softly,
wafting us upward on their wings,
singing harmonies unlike any
we have heard on earth.
Others say there will be nothing
but the fold of sky
and we ourselves will turn to
spirit-birds and our call
we will send down to you,
the call of triumph, the call
of tragedy, out over the tiny revolving
globe of earth, and we forever invisible,
just as it should be, just as it was
ordained by fate, but virtue
of our grace.

AT THE FRINGE
(translations)

A WINTER EVENING

When snow falls at the window,
Long tolls the evening bell,
The table is perpared for many,
And the larder is full.

Some, on their wanderings
Drift to the gate down darkened paths.
Golden sprouts the tree of mercy
From the cool snap of earth.

The wanderer steps lightly in:
Grief has turned the sill to stone.
There, pristine and glowing:
Bread and wine upon the table.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

DIRGE

Sleep and death, those somber demons
Course through my head in the night:
May the icy waves of eternity
Engulf the golden image
Of man. The purple body
Smashes on the treacherous reef
And a dark voice casts
Its lamentations on the sea.
Sister of stormy melancholy,
See how the funeral barge sinks
Under the stars,
The silent face of night.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

AT THE FRINGE

The corn is cut; the grapes are plucked.
In silence autumn hangs over the village.
Hammer on anvil chiming, chiming.
Laughter like red wine from the gardens.

From the shadows of the trellis
Bring asters for the pale child.
Tell us how long we have been dead;
The sun seeks its blackness.

In the pond the little fish gleam red.
Fearsome the brow knitted in thought;
An evening wind whispers at the windows,
Blue organ tones rising.

The star and its secret glittering
Draw our gaze skyward again.
The mother's ghost in torment trembling;
Black mignonettes in the dark.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

DECLINE

Above the white pond
Wild birds have taken flight.
At evening an icy wind
blows from our stars.

Above our graves the shattered brow
Of night is bowed; we swing beneath
The oaktree on a silver barge.

The white walls of the city hum.
Under arches of thorn
Oh my brother, we climb blindly
Like the clock's hands
Toward the midnight hour.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

SLEEP

To hell with your dark poisons,
White sleep!
This sinister garden
Of glimmering trees
heavy with snakes, night moths,
Spiders, bats.
Stranger! your ghost fades
Into the red of sunset,
A gloomy pirate
On the salt-sea of affliction.
White birds flail their wings
At the edge of night
Above the toppling cities
Of steel.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

GRODEK

At evening autumn woods moan
With deadly weapons, the fading sun
Rolls down behind the golden plains
And blue lakes. Night surrounds
The dying warriors, the ravings and
The lamentations of their shattered mouths.
But still, silent in the vale of willows,
The spilled blood wells, a vengeful god
Dwelling in its red cloud: lunar coolness.
All roads lead to cruel decay.
Beneath the golden bough of night and stars,
Sister's shadow flits through the hushed grove
To greet the ghosts of heroes, the bleeding heads;
And softly the dark flutes of autumn pipe in the reeds.
O prouder grief! Your honoured altars.
Today hot flames of the spirit feed a mighty anguish:
The grandchildren never to be born.

--Georg Trakl
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

THIS YEAR IS LIKE
THE YEAR A THOUSAND YEARS AGO

This year is like the year a thousand years ago.
We carry the pitcher; we prod the backs of our cattle;
We knit and know nothing of winter;
We drink new wine and know nothing...
Soon we will be forgotten
And poems melt like snow by the house.

This year is like the year a thousand years ago.
We peer into the forest as if it were the sty of the world;
We tell lies, and weave baskets for apples and pears;
We sleep while our muddied shoes weather on the doorstep.

This year is like the year a thousand years ago.
We know nothing; we know nothing of downfall,
Nothing of sunken cities, nothing of the flood
In which horses and men have drowned.

-- Thomas Bernhard
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

TO SAY A WORD

How difficult it is to say a word
To those who have compromised,
Those unable to distinguish
Between a dream and the solid boughs of the pear tree.

How difficult it is to say a word
On this dusty street
As alien to my shoes
As the sun is to the snow and water is to the desert.

How difficult it is to say a word
To my father and to my mother;
How difficult it is to say a word
To all those who see me
Aging in a wounded autumn.

How difficult it is to say a word
In these days that are so forgettable.
How difficult it is to say a word...

--Thomas Bernhard
(translation with L. D. Davidson)

THE WIDOW

The cold has gnarled her fingers,
the heat has blistered her arms.
The weather has reached her brain
and turned it into a storm cloud.
She wears no black veils,
no fur or feathers, but creeps
naked like a lizard.
She is ugly.
A dog sniffs at her solitude
and takes off yelping.
She smells
incitingly
of absence.

--Nina Cassian

GHOST

A rug of dead butterflies at my feet,
dead and limp
(they don't experience rigor mortis).
I, on the other hand, am quite healthy:
I've extracted my liver,
plucked out my lungs,
wrenched out my heart,
and nothing hurts anymore.

To become a ghost
is a solution
I weakly recommend.

--Nina Cassian

THE COUPLE

Necks crossed, then parallel,
they float in slow motion
white and hazel
mingling their blond contrasts,
their floating heads
watching the world from lunar heights,
their fragile legs like antennae,
the bones of their foreheads
breathing sadness and exile
as they circle in their dismal arena,
straining upward to escape
as if pulled by invisible leashes
in love with their heads
but hating their captive bodies.
They separate, they follow
like the languid hours
of the final days
of an extinct species--
giraffes!

--Nina Cassian

FARCE

Allow me to rearrange my bones--
those awkward obstacles
blocking my flesh,

leading it, forcing it into
a pear (my woman's shape)
or starfish (my hands).

Allow my bones to
try out new geometries--
the outline of the world's first
schooner, or the transparent
skeleton of a liliy,
or the genealogical tree
with its posthumous fruit,
its final offspring barren.

Allow my bones to kneel down
when I pretend to pray,
so that the kind Paleontologist
will be fooled at least once!

--Nina Cassian

THAT ANIMAL

That animal was tamed by me.
I extracted it from chaos;
I smeared it
with the pale unction of my kindness.

And then it swallowed me!
What a foul muzzle!
How unworthy its bowels!

You hear me, Jonah?

--Nina Cassian

THE YOUNG BAT

To begin, he circled my neck shyly
and laced it with his singing;
I almost fell in love with his ugly
triangular head, his squinting eyes,
and the sound of his frail bones.

At his first bite
I felt a great relief.
My pulse throbbed eagerly
knowing my blood would flow, diluted,
into another goitre, absolved of sin.

Then I grew weaker.
Clamped to my neck, the vampire
was drinking me, drinking me constantly.
His wings flared wide and free,
his eyes burned like two hieroglyphs--
but I couldn't decipher the message.

--Nina Cassian

THE HERMITS

ELEGY FOR DYLAN THOMAS

Down the pollen-seething sea-hissed path
see him swagger broad-limbed meadowing
sunblanched scampering frail-sky singing
home and fatherlanded loosed from
cynic-hardening fistbanging bars
and anecdoting on the sweet surrender evening
into his shed he stumbles plundering
the blackout of his heart and yanks up
the wordthrusted firey-shouting tenderness
all petals soft medallions and the grief
of knowing too much. Oh it is a glorious
volcanoed avalanching cut-glassed
fat-assed beerswilling prime of a godly
poem ink-wave-shimmering under his
stubby-fisted gentle hands and him to go so
soon ungentle and rageful but not yet
not yet so then guard him good angels still
in this his honeyed sepulchre of night.

THE PERFECT DAY

Will courage drop as a windfall
at the wind's extremity--the thin end
of my whining? Will contentment come
in a hammock too late as stars die
in my mouth and my limbs lose their action
in the sand? Only a malcontent knows
the grinding edge of summer, the cruelty
of breezes, the self-centeredness of shunning weather.

Loss of faith: I let go the rudder
but the waves of childhood overturn
my little boat of laughter--I drown
in my fear like a cat.

Sensible professions come to mind
but numbers in neat rows cuff me at
wrist and neck. I would be rich and
temperate; yet this dreaming has me
grieving for the perfect day--an endless
birthday long denied me, candles all
blown out, the wish fulfilled.

I measure heartache by the chattering
of friends which gusting shakes the
silver stillness of my hours. I garner
loneliness (a frail resolve), pick up
the pen, hear words.

HOMELESS

I had fixed my heart
in a tree,
my eyes in the clouds,
my limbs in a lover's arms.
I was empty.
I had died.
I loved the leaving of myself
in yesterday,
the love was in the leaving.
I do not like this recognition:
to open my eyes is to see
confinement; to move my limbs
is to find myself alone;
to feel morning is to retrieve
my heart--it was so happy
in its nook, its dark nest,
safe from wind, from rain.

THESE NIGHTINGALES, THESE SWANS

In organ-lofted praise
these nightingales net
windy losses in the dawn sky
open as love.
Dredged from sleep's
cruel blunderings
here's a second start for us:
the window flung wide
the grace of an annunciation
the winning of bonus years.
The job botched the love affair
ruined all can be righted now
all begun again and made perfect
as the clear sailing of these swans
in the crisp lens
of the telescope
of the heart.

FIVE POEMS WRITTEN AFTER SEEING THE PAINTINGS OF T'AO-CHI

Prelude

Here we only watch and dream:
each morning's spring,
each summer, afternoon.
At midnight, the year turns;
moonlight strikes the mountain's peak
and migrant birds fly south.

1.
The air is white ash.
A bird flies into it
like a broken fig leaf;
its cry is 'Love gone-by,
Love gone-by...'

2.
The rock is blessed
with a rainbow across it
like the hand of God;
you can't separate rock from rainbow,
or the poet from his longing.

3.
Heavy the blue evening on the irises;
they don't even look up
as I pass; they are in deep thought--they
are the evening's concubines,
so dedicated to their duties, almost too
lovely to be seen.

4.
The huddle of old men
are so busy arguing philosophy
they don't see the grandeur above them.
The willow trees mock them,
laughing in the wind
like irreverent children.

5.
The bamboo fronds seem to be moving,
yet there's no wind or rain;
it's their business to appear busy,
to flutter
with the joy of giving green.

(for David Schestenger)

NIGHT SERENADE

I can't sleep.
A mosquito, whining in my ear,
nips me out of a dream of you
in your silk kimono--white swan floating
on inky waters. I take my guitar
onto the terrace. I begin to serenade you
in the dark, at first softly, then louder
and louder, competing with the frogs
deep in the valley under the great pines.
By the bowl of red chrysanthemums that you love so,
I strum my lament.
I miss you so much: See, I have already broken
three strings!

(for Michael Calvert)

THE HERMITS

We fear the design of our lives
folded inside the clouds
each piece concocted and unfurled
by knowing and sadistic gods:
we find the rules
unruleable
suggestions futile as clairvoyance
and dream of small studies
in green springed hills
reclusive as old portfolios
a place where making right work
comes easily as verses
from a muse on tap
a peal of bells under water
the whale's cry
a pitch above the soul
an oblivion of stillness
grand as thinking of an ancestor
a mentor gone in shadows
down the years of all imaginings.

NOTES

Evesham Station 9/9/74: Evesham is a market town in Worcestershire and is pronounced 'Eve-shum'. Ruislip is a suburb of London and is pronounced 'Rye-slip'.

The Mad Man of Öland: Öland is pronounced 'Erlant'.

On Listening to Josquin Des Prez: Josquin Des Prez (1450-1521) was a French composer known for his rousing secular songs as well as his ethereal sacred music.

A Day in Carmarthen, 1919: Carmarthen is a market town in South Wales.

On Seeing Vermeer's 'Officer and Laughing Girl': The painting hangs in The Frick Collection, New York City.

The Defrocking of Pastor Van Dieman: The story in the poem is based on an item in an English newspaper from August 1974. The name 'Van Dieman' is fictitious and is pronounced 'VanDeemun'.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Christopher Hewitt grew up in the villages of Welland and Upton-on-Severn in Worcestershire, England. He was born with a brittle bone condition called *osteogenesis imperfecta* and has used a wheelchair since the age of nine.

Mr. Hewitt received his MFA in Poetry at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1981. He has published two chapbooks of poetry: The Careless Days, and The Infinte Et Cetera. His award-winning poems have appeared in The New Yorker, The American Poetry Review, The Observer Poetry Prize Anthology, Salmagundi, Cimarron Review, and other magazines. His translations of the Rumanian poet Nina Cassian have appeared in Life Sentence: The Selected Poems of Nina Cassian, published by Noton (1990) and Anvil Press (England, 1990).

Mr. Hewitt has written the libretti for two song cycles, Metamorphosis and Amours, music by Benton Hess, which have been performed in New York City and Oberlin, Ohio. He has also written the libretto for a cantata, Cantata V: Raggedstone Hill, music by Dennis Riley, which has been performed in New York City.

He is currently at work on a book of short stories and an opera libretto for composer Jed Distler. He teaches Creative Writing and English at Fordham University and John Jay College. Christopher D. Hewitt is Associate Editor of Art &Understanding, a new magazine in which writers and artists respond to the AIDS crisis.

ACID FREE - LIGNIN FREE
pH 8.0 - 10.0 BUFFERED
Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.
800-862-2228
2012